

Consumption corridors as a means for overcoming trends in (un)sustainable consumption

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When we look at sustainable consumption today, we can see many positive trends. There are clear increases in the consumption of more sustainable products. Purchases of organic food have grown, for example. Sustainable fashion labels are emerging, and energy-efficient household appliances are increasingly becoming the norm. Simultaneously, there has been a noticeable rise in electro-mobility, and increasing numbers of individuals are participating in car-sharing initiatives, for instance. Indeed, we can provide numbers for some of these trends: the turnover in organic food consumption in Germany quadrupled between 2000 and 2015 in terms of billions of euros (see Figure 1). Purchases of electric cars globally increased by more than ten times between 2011 and 2015, interestingly and significantly with China making up a large share of that figure (see Figure 2).

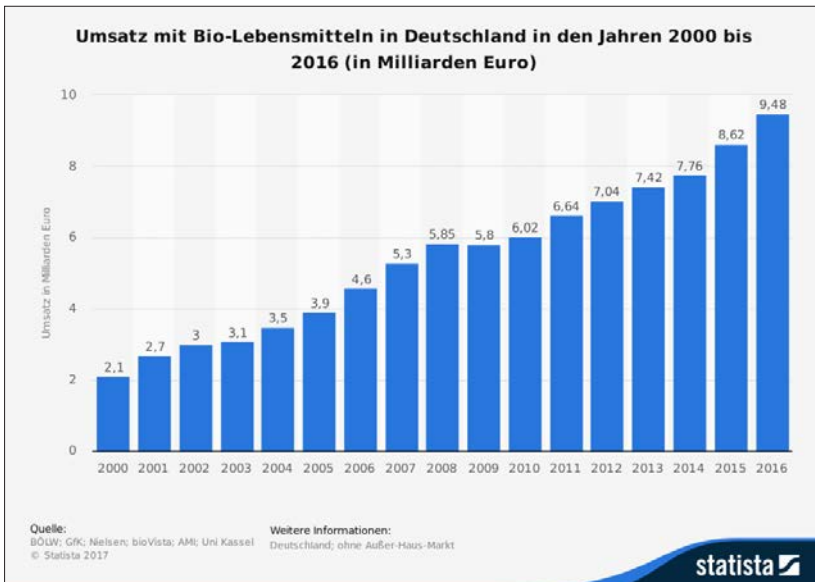


Figure 1: Organic food consumption in Germany (turnover in billion €). Source: Statistika.

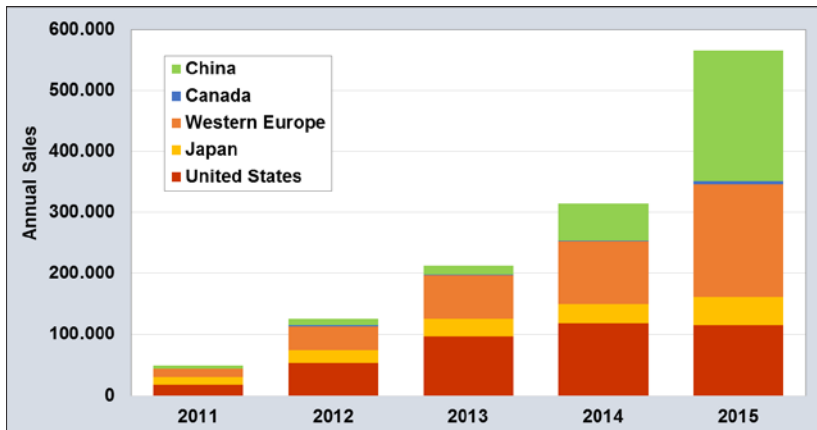


Figure 2: Global sales in electric vehicles. Source: <http://energy.gov/eere/vehicles/fact-918-march-28-2016-global-plug-light-vehicle-sales-increased-about-80-2015>.

Such numbers correlate well with studies reporting an increasing prominence of environmental attitudes among consumers. When asked about the importance of environmental criteria in their consumption decisions, many consumers say that they are really important (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). In addition, scholars are reporting the spread of anti- or post-consumerist sentiments in society (Cohen 2013). Similarly, one can observe an increase in numbers and frequency of newspaper articles questioning whether consumption really makes us happy.

So, looking at these numbers and the changes in values and attitudes, does this mean that everything is okay? Does it mean that we are finally heading towards a brighter future in terms of sustainable consumption? Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Let us adopt a more differentiated perspective on these developments. First of all, next to these positive trends in sustainable consumption, several simultaneous ones that are not even close to being benign exist. Taking Germany as an example, many such trends can be named (Umweltbundesamt; Statistisches Bundesamt). Since 2000 the number of single households in Germany has increased by 20 per cent; that is, households that are, on average, more inefficient in terms of the use of space and energy, water and other resour-

es. Moreover, studies document not just the spread of the aforementioned energy-efficient appliances, but also the increasing use of electric appliances overall in households. Scholars are observing an increase in the living space used per person and a corresponding rise in expectations regarding house and flat sizes. More generally, the space used for settlement and transport is increasing faster than the size of the population, again reflecting that each individual is using more space. The sales of not just electric vehicles have risen, but also of cars in general, especially diesel cars, which are not known for being particularly clean. We also travel more kilometers per person and more for leisure, which means that we travel by choice and not because we are forced to be mobile for work reasons or other circumstances. Last, but certainly not least, the number of passengers on airplanes boarded in Germany between 2004 and 2015 rose by 50 per cent, and air travel is a huge concern, of course, when it comes to carbon emissions and climate change.

How the negative trends compare with the positive ones can perhaps be illustrated by contrasting the numbers of global sales in electric vehicles shown above with the sales in new SUVs—typically not the most energy-efficient cars—in Germany alone between 2001 and 2012, and expectations regarding sales up to 2020 (see Figure 3). Apparently, (German) consumers love SUVs much more than electric cars.

In addition, a more differentiated look at the positive trends in sustainable consumption highlighted above reveals that the factors driving the purchases of more sustainable products are actually varied. Consumers do not necessarily buy sustainable products because they care about sustainability. Rather, many of these products are purchased for health reasons. It is, of course, not important for the given product if it is bought for sustainability or for health reasons. One could argue that the most important fact is that the more sustainable product is purchased. However, if consumers buy sustainable products not for their general sustainability characteristics but for health reasons, generalised hope for the improved sustainability of consumption across product groups is doomed. Consumers do not attribute potential health effects to all types of product in a similar manner. It is no surprise, therefore, that consumers have tended to turn much more to food than to clothes when it comes to ‘sustainable’ consumption. This is the case even though clothes that touch the skin are really close to consumers. So, products further away, or to which

consumers attribute fewer impacts on their health, will not benefit as much from health concerns as drivers of more sustainable choices.

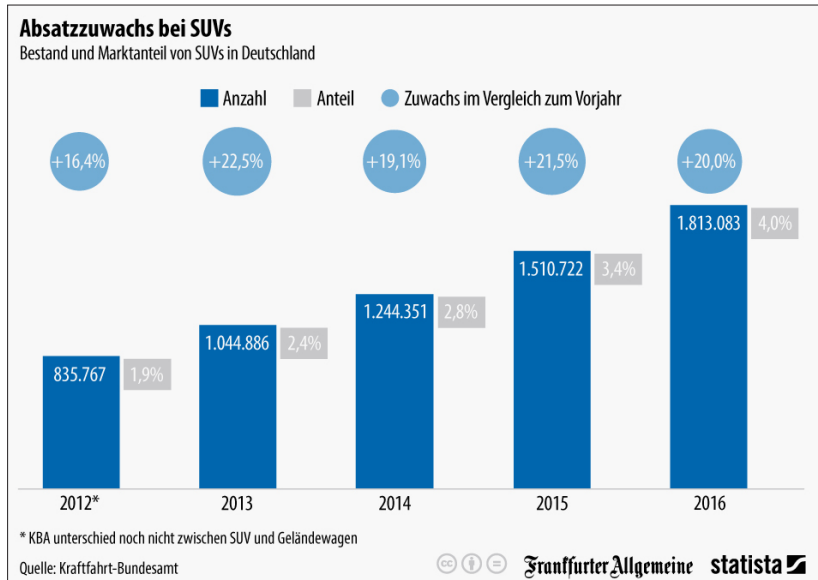


Figure 3: New SUVs in Germany. Source: Statistisches Bundesamt.

In other cases, the consumption of more sustainable products has been driven by price incentives. The sale of energy-efficient appliances mentioned above has been supported by government subsidies, for instance, especially in the case of kitchen appliances. Here, governments deemed such subsidies meaningful, because the technological innovation led to such improvements in energy efficiency that a relatively fast turnover of products (approximately five years in the case of refrigerators) promised significant reductions in household energy use. What does it mean when more sustainable products are purchased because of price incentives rather than consumer interest in their sustainability characteristics, however? Again, one could argue that what matters is that consumers buy the more sustainable product. Yet, if the purchase of a more sustainable product is driven by price incentives, it may mean that consumer choices in terms of product use and selection may end up being unsustainable after all. In the case of refrigerators, studies have reported that

governmental subsidies for energy-efficient refrigerators that were not combined with an obligation to hand in the old fridge, for instance, meant that one fridge would simply be moved to the basement and continue to be used for cooling drinks (Brohmann et al. 2012). Likewise, governmental subsidies for energy-efficient appliances that are not combined with measures to prevent upscaling frequently run the risk of merely supporting households following fashions for larger appliances. Just look at the dramatic increase in screen sizes for TVs but also the diffusion of the American styles of huge refrigerators into European kitchens (op. cit.).

Overall, then, trends in consumption are pointing towards continuing and increasing unsustainability rather than sustainability! Why is this the case after 40 years of discussion on limits to growth, and after 25 years of scholars and politicians talking about sustainable consumption? Why are negative trends still overshadowing the positive ones by far?

Massive existing obstacles to sustainable consumption provide some answers to these questions. Numerous contextual and structural conditions hinder consumers in their efforts to make more sustainable consumption choices. These include, but are not limited to, (too much) information, time constraints, infrastructural lock-ins, as well as consumer culture in general. Let us look at these in turn. Indeed, consumers today probably have too much information about products, including, and in particular, inaccessible, unnecessary and unreliable information. The small print on the back of products is infamous, of course. Likewise, consumers are bombarded with myriad labels telling them that a product is organic, green, local, fair, high quality, made from happy animals, and so on. These labels all have their own selection of more or (frequently) less stringent criteria, and consumers do not have the time or energy to navigate their way through this jungle of labels and investigate them all closely.

Consumers also often simply get the ‘wrong’, or at least not the most important, information, regarding the sustainability of their consumption choices. This is partly due to existing power structures in the global political economy and partly due to assumptions about consumer behaviour. Thus, consumers get a considerable amount of information asking them to shop greener, either in the form of normative demands by governments and NGOs, for example, or in the form of advertising for ‘greener’ products. Even if the latter information

were reliable, however, such promotion of more sustainable products might miss the point. From the perspective of sustainable consumption, asking consumers to shop less rather than just greener is just as important, if not more important. Of course, such a focus on strong sustainable consumption¹ runs counter to the still-dominant growth paradigm, as well as politicians' dependence on business support (Fuchs et al. 2016). Moreover, it does not fit with an economic model built on mass consumption. Furthermore, any communication about consuming less, to the extent that it exists, is dwarfed by the skillful, expansive and extremely pervasive activities of a vast advertising industry telling consumers to shop more.

An additional problem exists in terms of the selection of information about the sustainability of consumption addressed in the public debate. Assuming that consumers are more likely to make tougher choices (in terms of financial resources, effort, loss in convenience...) in the interest of sustainability once they have got used to the easy ones, in the past politicians and NGOs have often focused on 'win-win' situations or simple solutions. For instance, contributing to sustainability with the use of energy-efficient light bulbs was a prominent narrative for a long time. The question, however, is whether dominant cognitive processes really facilitate such spillover from easier to harder steps. Studies have shown that consumers often have a false impression of the sustainability of their consumption as a result of the attention that marginal improvements receive. Having changed the light bulbs, they may have the impression of having significantly improved the sustainability of their consumption and see less need to invest additional efforts and resources in sustainability, especially as they tend to be less aware of the dozens of their (often habitual) consumption decisions that lead in the opposite direction. In this context the question of whether politicians and NGOs really want to flood consumers' brains with information about marginal improvements in the field of sustainable consumption becomes critical. Should the focus rather be exclusively on the big issues (Bilharz 2008)?

Time constraints present an equally significant barrier to sustainable consumption. Even if consumers are inclined to take the sustainability of their

1 In contrast to weak sustainable consumption, which focuses on improvements in resource efficiency (Fuchs and Lorek 2005).

consumption decisions seriously and give it a relatively high priority, consumers are also constrained today by societal contexts translating into very fast and very complex lives. In many instances, stopping at the supermarket on the way home rather than taking a detour to the organic food store, or replacing a product rather than fixing it, become the choice of the moment. Time matters, in particular, when it comes to mobility, including business and leisure travel. When time is short, we are much more inclined to take the car than the bike or the plane instead of the train in long-distance travel. Notice how such choices start to shift when public transportation by bus or train becomes reliably faster than going by car or plane. Finally, time constraints restrict consumers' abilities to gather and critically reflect on information and to (re)consider consumption choices.

As highlighted above, the existing infrastructure presents another obstacle to improving the sustainability of consumption. In Western consumer societies, the individual is very much locked into certain consumption patterns, certain levels of consumption, energy and resources. Studies have shown that even consumers trying to make serious efforts to reduce their ecological footprint tend to easily run into roadblocks preventing them from achieving substantial reductions. Infrastructural constraints include buildings and their characteristics, mobility systems and urban planning, as well as social services, for example (Csutora 2012).

Perhaps most fundamentally, consumer culture forms a powerful structural force inducing overconsumption. In industrialised (as well as many segments of the BRICS and even the wealthy segments of developing) countries today we live in societies in which we tend to satisfy many of our basic needs through material consumption. Whether it's the need for identity or for belonging, for creativity or for control, we tend to shop for their satisfaction. Consumer culture, thus, also means that consumption is competitive. Using material consumption to express status and identity results in the 'keeping up with the Joneses' effect or 'keeping up with friends', or whatever consumers are watching on TV or Facebook at that time.² Rather than just considering the 'negative'

2 An additional problem with this dynamic is that media representations tend to normalise overconsumption by associating increasingly expensive possessions with the lower-income segments.

drivers of consumption, such as status-seeking, however, it is important to note that material consumption will always also entail positive experiences for consumers. Scholars and practitioners should not underestimate the fun of consumption. Consumers shop not only because they want to keep up with somebody or because they are forced to buy convenience foods as a result of time constraints. They also shop because they like making choices, because material consumption can also meet desires for aesthetical sensations, for creativity and self-improvement. Individuals who do not enjoy shopping for clothes may well enjoy travelling to interesting cultural places, for example. Overcoming the societal inclination to turn to material consumption in search of needs fulfillment is therefore a huge task. An interesting link between the time constraints mentioned above and consumer society exists in this context. The faster society becomes, the less room is left for time-intensive pursuits of creative activities or social relationships that could provide less materially intensive (and some would argue more lasting and intensive) satisfiers of basic needs, and the more likely it becomes again that individuals will turn to more material consumption to satisfy these needs.

Other factors influencing the (un)sustainability of consumption could be named here. What the above discussion demonstrates, however, is that sustainability is at best one of many factors influencing our consumption decisions and impacts, and frequently not the most important one (Ropke 1999). Barriers to sustainable consumption can be summarised in terms of a number of concepts that scholars use to describe and analyse them: the rebound effect, the value–action gap, and the action–impact gap. First, the rebound effect has many forms, but in its most basic and illustrative form, it depicts the dynamic that money not spent on the electricity bill for one product—because a consumer purchased the more efficient one—will tend to be spent in another way, thereby consuming resources again (Hertwich 2005). Second, the value–action (or attitude–behaviour) gap captures that consumers may report that sustainability criteria rank high when they make their consumption decisions but actually make non-corresponding consumption choices (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Third, the action–impact gap arises from an individual's inability to step out of societal structures, technological systems and existing infrastructures, as pointed out above (Csutora 2012).

What we know then is that consumers' adoption of more sustainable consumption practices is highly selective and overall superseded by opposing trends. Structural forces locking in overconsumption exist, the recognition of which should put to rest attempts to individualise responsibility for it (Maniates 2001; Sanne 2002). Consequently, we have yet to make real progress in terms of the overall sustainability of consumption. We are still at a point where income is the prime indicator of resource consumption.

For the remainder of the article, therefore, I would like to invite you to join me in taking a different perspective on sustainable consumption. Let us start by assuming that the purpose of consumption is to allow individuals to live a good life (Di Giulio et al. 2012). The purpose of consumption, then, is not to provide growth or to absorb surplus consumption, but to allow individuals to meet their needs. What are the quality and quantity of ecological and social resources that we need in order to be able to consume for this purpose? What quantity and quality of ecological and social resources do we need to live a good life? This perspective also implies that the purpose of consumption is to fulfill every subjective want and desire. The purpose of consumption is to fulfill our objective needs, the fundamental needs that are associated with being human and opportunities for living a good life. From this perspective, consumption is associated with a paradigm of sufficiency (Princen 2005). Being able to fulfill our objective needs, in turn, means that we require a minimum level of consumption.

If we go a step further, we can ask ourselves what it would imply if we wanted such a minimum level of consumption for all individuals, now and in the future? In a world of limited planetary resources, the answer to this question is that we will also have to talk about maximum sustainable consumption levels. Such maximum consumption levels would need to be defined at the point beyond which consumption by one individual or group would hurt other individuals' chances to meet their minimum consumption levels.

The space between the minimum consumption levels required to be able to live a good life and the maximum consumption levels not to be overstepped in order not to hurt other people's chances to live a good life is a sustainable consumption corridor (Blättel-Mink et al. 2013; Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, see Figure IV). Within this space, sustainable consumption can take place. Within

this space, individuals are free to make their choices and design their lives according to their own preferences, without hurting the lives of members of the present or future generations. A world of sustainable consumption would be defined by many such corridors, perhaps by the resource or consumption sector (see Figure 4).

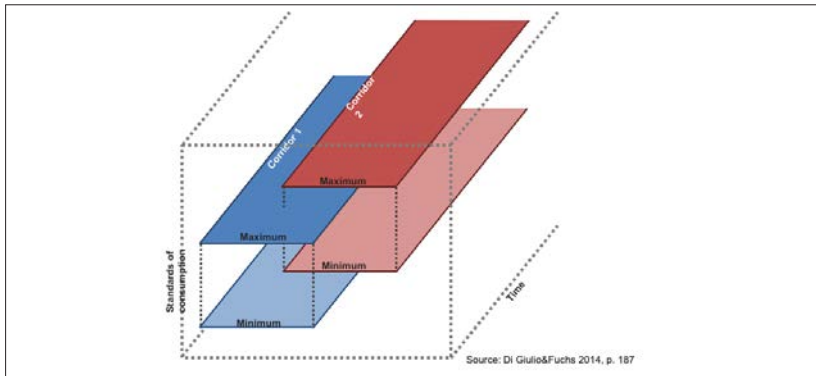


Figure 4: Sustainable consumption corridors. Source: Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014.

The definition and implementation of such sustainable consumption corridors would also therefore improve distributive justice. Distributive justice, in this context, does not mean that everybody has exactly the same, but that everybody is able to achieve at least the minimum consumption level necessary to be able to live a good life. Sustainable consumption corridors thus embody a keen concern for the poor. The definition of sustainable consumption corridors, in turn, depends on participatory justice. Societies need to agree on (a list of) objective needs, as well as the appropriate satisfiers for these needs, in order to allow for their translation into minimum and maximum consumption levels.

Clearly, defining and implementing sustainable consumption corridors will be a complex task. Defining objective needs and satisfiers and translating them into minimum consumption levels is a challenging task and likely to involve considerable debate. Likewise, clearly understanding consumption impacts, which is necessary for the definition of maximum consumption standards, provides a further challenge, albeit probably a smaller one. Ultimately, however,

a world of consumption corridors, in which consumption is intended to allow each and every individual now and in the future to live a good life, would be a sustainable world.

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